

“Put Away the Foreign Gods”

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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It’s been another crazy week here in the United States of America, which haven’t felt very “united” lately. Emotions are ranging the gamut, from joy to grief, from relief to anger. I am hopeful that the divisive rhetoric and unsubstantiated claims will soon be largely behind us ... and we can get on to the important issues that really need to be debated and discussed. The pandemic. The economy. The hoped-for stimulus bill. Racial justice. Police reform. Climate change. *So much more.* I look forward to a day when these issues can actually be *discussed*, when people can talk *with* other people who hold differing points of view, instead of *against* them, and we can all work together to address our nation’s problems in a much more civil and constructive manner than has been the case in recent years.

This election was about many things. Chief among them, I believe, was a question of identity: *what kind of a nation do we want to be?* Clearly, there were competing visions about our future.

Ancient Israel faced a similar problem. Our reading this morning from the book of Joshua tells of a time when the Israelite people have settled in the land that is going to become their new home. The Israelites are here, and they are going to *stay*. But what kind of a people are they going to be?

Joshua summons them all to the town called Shechem, in the hill country, roughly in the center of the land. He reminds them of their history – it’s always a good thing to remember our history – and sets before them a challenge: “Revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River [Euphrates] and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.”

Sure. Easy to do, right? The Israelites pledge their loyalty to God, and then head home. Right?

No, not so fast. Joshua wants to make it clear to them what he means. He means *unswerving loyalty and fidelity* to the Lord their God. He lays it before them as a choice: “*Choose this day* whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

The people tell Joshua that is exactly what they will do. They basically say: “Of course we will serve the Lord; of course we will forsake the other gods. The Lord is the one who brought us through the wilderness and into this land of promise. So of course we will serve the Lord. He is our God!”

You would think Joshua would be satisfied with that answer. He is not. He seems to feel that they really do not understand the stakes, they do not understand the *consequences* of what they are committing themselves to. “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” The way Joshua understood

God's covenant with Israel, God expected *unswerving loyalty*. No wishy-washiness, no backsliding, no saying one thing and doing another. If you say you're going to serve God, then *you better really mean it*.

Joshua knew these people; he knew how stubborn and rebellious they could be. He also knew just how *passionately* God wanted their steadfast devotion. He did not know what was going to happen – how Israel would fail to keep its part of the bargain, how they would turn aside from God time and again, how an army of false prophets would lie to them and lead them astray, how God would send judgment on Israel by means of the Assyrians, and on Judah by means of the Babylonians. But Joshua *did* know the heart and character of the Israelite people, and he knew the heart and character of God.

The people insist: "No, we will serve the Lord!" "The Lord our God we will serve," they say. "Him we will obey." Maybe they really *mean* it. The problem is that, later on, when they turned astray, they didn't choose to turn *back*. Even when God sent them prophet after prophet, giving them chance after chance to hear God's truth and repent from evil, they just chose to keep on sinning.

It's the same fundamental problem we still face today. There are people who try *really hard* to make it very clear what God's word *really says*. I try to be one of those. There are many people who sincerely try to be faithful. There are many others who choose to be faithful in *some* respects but willfully reject other teachings of Jesus they don't like or don't want to abide by. There are plenty of people who try to justify their actions when the plain sense of the gospel clearly says they are *not* in the right. There are lots of people who pay lip service to the gospel. And there are plenty who simply don't care, who will do what they want to do and say what they want to say, to serve their own selfish ends.

So Joshua's voice rings out across the centuries: *Choose this day whom you will serve*. Are you – or are you not – willing to go *all in* for God? In Joshua's day, that meant rejecting the foreign gods. There were plenty of those; the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, all the small nations living in and around Israel – each of them had their own god or set of gods that they worshiped. Some of those religions engaged in practices that were utterly at odds with what the Law of Moses taught. Some appear to have practiced sacred prostitution, a form of worship that required having sex with priests or priestesses. Others sometimes engaged in child sacrifice. We could do a study on the different religions that existed at the time of ancient Israel, although we don't have a whole lot of historical data to work with. All of those other religions died out and didn't leave many records behind.

In the United States today, the largest religion is, of course, Christianity. About 78% of the population claims to be Christian. The second largest religious group is actually the people who claim *no* religious affiliation, at about 16%. The Jews comprise only about 2% of the population; Buddhists and Muslims are both slightly more than 1%. Hindus are at about half a percent; various folk religions total about a quarter of a percent; and the remaining half a percent are made of up small numbers of people representing other world religions. That data is from a report from the Pew Research Center; similar percentages are reported in the CIA's *World Fact Book* and by the U.S. Department of State, although all of those reports are now several years old, so the current numbers may have changed slightly.

The ancient Israelites were living in a land filled with people who worshiped other gods. None of those groups had the commanding *majority* that Christianity has in our country today; they were all competing for attention, and it was tempting to the Israelites to follow a less ... *demanding* religion.

What's the temptation for Christians in America? To what religion or religions are we most

likely to turn to, if we stray from our Christian roots? I have known of a couple people who left Christianity and have claimed to become Buddhists, at least in theory. I have certainly known of some people who changed their religion because of the faith of their spouse; I know one man who chose to adopt the faith of his Jewish wife, and they both take it *very* seriously; in all honesty, they are one of the most profoundly devout families I know. If someone decides to leave Christianity and become something else, I would far rather see them dive *deep* into it, reading, learning, worshiping, than just becoming something in name only. In the final book in C. S. Lewis's classic *Chronicles of Narnia* series, one of the characters devoutly worships another god, who turns out to be a sham, but Aslan – who represents Jesus – accepts that character's service to that other god because it was *good* service, and was therefore truly offered to Aslan, even though the character did not know that's what he was doing. The idea is that good and faithful service in some other faith is preferable to *poor* service to any god – *including* Jesus. Devout faith in some other religion might well put one closer to God than *no* faith at all.

You see, I think the biggest temptation for Christians today, if they wander from the faith, is to choose the option of *no faith at all*. I cannot tell you how many people I know who *used* to belong to or attend church somewhere, and now worship *nowhere*. Often, there are understandable reasons why people left. We Christians don't always do a good job embodying Christ to the world. There have been far too many scandals – too many televangelists exploiting their followers for money, too many pastors and other Christian leaders caught in inappropriate relationships, too many priests and pastors who have abused children and youth, too many churches that preach more hate than love, too many pastors and priests who have abused their power, too much *evil* in the church of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, people leave simply because they didn't feel *welcome* in the church. Other times, Christians engage in markedly un-Christian behavior, and when a church or a Christian leader tries to "rein them in," they get mad, storm out the door, and blame the church, or its leadership, for their departure. Believe me, I've seen *that* happen a time or two. It's definitely the case that some people simply *don't want to hear* the gospel in all its fullness; they *aren't willing to make the changes* that Jesus asks and expects of them. Those people make their choice: the choice to serve *another god*. Often, that god isn't really a "god" at all. Sometimes people choose selfishness, or denial, or flat-out rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yes, the greatest temptation to "serve other gods" in our culture today is simply to slip out the back door to *nowhere*. Leave Christianity, and end up worshiping *nothing*. That is the "foreign god" that is *most appealing* to many American Christians today. No devotion, no obligations, no sacred teachings, no challenge to grow or change, just follow whatever "wisdom" – however good or bad, however robust or foolish – they choose. Those are the people I worry about the most; those are the people we need to be trying to reach, more than any other. Many of them do have good hearts and are simply reacting to negative experiences they have had along the way. But there are others whose hearts are filled with selfish or evil motives, people who have no light to guide them, people who will take advantage of a situation to serve their own ends. Those people can do *great harm*. They need to be given clear boundaries of what will – and will not – be tolerated ... or else innocent people can really get hurt.

Joshua's call rings out through the centuries. *Choose this day whom you will serve!* He's calling to *me*. He's calling to *you*. We're either *in* this thing we call Christianity – or we're not. We're either *all* in – or we're not. In Joshua's mind – and in God's – there is *no middle ground*. We all must *choose*.

And heaven help us if we choose to serve God ... and then don't follow through....

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